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The Sessions Record: A Different View

Shortly after Bill Sessions became FBI director, he received an invitation from Coretta Scott King to come to Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta for the upcoming Martin Luther King Day Celebration. Knowing how hard the late J. Edgar Hoover had tried to defame and smear her husband and the disgust and anger that produced, especially in the African American community, Sessions was surprised that Mrs. King and her family would want to have anything to do with either him or the FBI.

He accepted—to the astonishment of the bureau's old guard—and learned during his visit that Mrs. King wanted reconciliation as much as he did. Sessions has returned to Ebenezer Baptist Church for King Day celebrations ever since, including last Monday in his capacity as a member of the National Martin Luther King Holiday Commission. That Bill Sessions bears little resemblance to the ethically numb, self-serving and greedy FBI director described in a scathing report sent to the White House by outgoing attorney general William Barr and the Bush Justice Department earlier last week. Are they the same person?

It's now up to President Clinton to weigh the Bush administration's case against Sessions and decide. Clinton should take his time, study Sessions's weekend rebuttal and maybe even wait for his attorney general before making a final call. Coretta Scott King and former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young, among others, contend that this isn't the open-and-shut case Barr is making it out to be. "The petty charges, voluminous though they are, represent those forces within the bureau and the Justice Department that have been opposed to change since the Hoover days," they said in a statement of support on Saturday. Two black agents, speaking anonymously out of fear of becoming targets themselves, also said on Friday that it's because of Sessions's efforts to change the face of the FBI that he's made the personal Most Wanted List of many in the bureau and is now being fly-specked by the Justice Department.

This much is certain: Today's FBI is browner, blacker and more female than Hoover would have ever allowed. Bill Sessions had a lot to do with that. The same FBI that wiretapped and surveilled Dr. King, now actively participates with the King Holiday Commission in Youth Against Violence projects in communities across the country. Bill Sessions made that happen too. "Had it not been for [Sessions's] support and encouragement, we wouldn't be at this point today" said FBI agent Liz Cassell, spokeswoman for BADGE, an organization that includes 400 of the Bureau's 522 African American agents. She's referring to an accord that makes sweeping changes in FBI personnel procedures, and promises promotions, training, and improved job assignments for black FBI agents. "His efforts are responsible for us coming to an agreement on the class action suit issue" that would have nailed the FBI on discrimination charges, she said. But Sessions's decision to go for a settlement not only produced an outcry among some white agents. The predominately white FBI Agents Association went to federal court out of fear that their rights were being threatened by Sessions's agreement with the black agents. They were unsuccessful.

Sessions got into more trouble with the FBI bureaucracy when he refused to appeal a 1988 federal court ruling in a class action suit that found the agency guilty of systemic discrimination against Hispanic agents—they were mostly confined to the "Taco Circuit" where dead-end jobs and boring, low-level work were found. Senior agents in charge of FBI field offices had voted unanimously to have the case appealed. Instead, Sessions ordered the 11 plaintiffs promoted, made them eligible for back pay and took the heat.

Then he further threatened the system by taking seriously a black agent's racial harassment charges (his "colleagues" taped a picture of an ape over a photo of his children, threatened to cut off his lips and do vile things to his wife). Sessions appointed a senior African American agent to investigate the case. Sessions settled that case, too, and for big bucks. But the crowning glory of it all may have come when Sessions gave some in the FBI the last thing they ever expected: the first African American spokesman in the bureau's history.

This has been all too much for some to take. Minorities and female agents are being favored with quotas and all sorts of special treatment goes the rap, and the internal resentment against Sessions is deep. "Previously, it was only hiring, and people didn't care because it was going on below them," one white agent told The Post last year. "But under Sessions it is going to involve promotions. . . . Now it's time to make things even, so they're going to take my job and give it to the son of someone that they discriminated against 20 years ago." Over my dead body, he might well have added.

This may be one of the reasons Sessions is engaged in a fight for his job and name. A lot of people on the outside hope he wins the struggle. But he'll need more than a strong record on racial justice to overcome charges of weak ethics. Sessions needs to show he honored the obligations of his office and the law with the same dedication that he defended and protected human rights. Clinton should give him that chance.

Sessions's wife has said her husband is naive in the ways of Washington. Let's hope that doesn't extend to his conduct in office. Said one veteran Washington insider who supported Sessions on his attempts to diversity the FBI and is hoping that the Bush Justice Department can be proven wrong: "When you are going to be a revolutionary, your stuff had better be straight."

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